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As a middle child and the first girl, I had to develop a bit of a capacity to make my voice heard

Harriet Shing is achieving a lot of firsts in the Victorian Parliament. She talks to **ALEX WHITE** about life, love, loss and the Legislative Council

VICTORIAN MP Harriet Shing is on her hands and knees wrestling five boisterous dogs in Gippsland. It is a world away from the halls of the Victorian Parliament but the 40-year-old can't help herself.

"I absolutely love being in the company of dogs," Shing says. "Everybody who knows me, knows that. I don't ever want to be without a dog in my life."

This is the lovable side of the first female member for Victoria's Eastern Region — Victoria's first openly lesbian MP.

The visit to the Saffron On The Hill Dog Rescue is a rare snapshot into the life of one of Victorian Labor's newest recruits, who claimed a seat when the Andrews Government swept to power in 2014.

"I am still learning how to be a politician in a sense and how to be a public person," she says. "I tend to wear my heart on my sleeve and I give a lot of myself in this job."

A quick ring around Spring St produces terms such as "easygoing, caring" and "intelligent" to describe her. But the label Shing hates most is "rising star."

"It's not a term that sits easily with me," she says flicking back her shiny brunette mane. "It makes me sound like I am in this to peddle some sort of personal agenda."

Growing up in the Melbourne suburb of Lilydale, dreams of entering politics were not on the radar.

As the first girl among five siblings, Shing spent most of her younger years "mucking about" in the bush at the foot of the Dandenong Ranges, while her parents were at work.

"It was great," Shing says, crediting this time for igniting her passion in agricultural issues later in life.

If you ask a simple question about local dairy farmers, Shing can rattle off endless information like it has been burned into the back of her brain. Intellect is paramount and more than once she has described her education as the "greatest gift" her parents could ever provide.

She spent her school years at Tintern Grammar in Ringwood East and, before graduating in 1994, managed to convince librarians to allow her to increase her borrowing limit to take more books home.

"I was a voracious reader," she says and jokes about occasionally falling asleep in the bathroom after locking herself safely away from her siblings to read.

Very much the night owl, Shing still often pushes her bedtime past 2am for a good book. Shing is also renowned for her tenacious debating style, a skill she attributes to her large, robust family.

"As a middle child and the first girl, I had to develop a bit of a capacity to make my voice heard," she says.

In her maiden speech to Parliament, Shing described a dictionary "the size of a toolbox" kept at

the family dinner table to settle disputes. If the issue couldn't be dealt with there, a family committee was called, chaired by the five siblings.

Her dad David Shing, 74, a former GP, laughs when he thinks of the creative punishments his children could concoct and now clearly sees why his eldest daughter found her way into politics.

"She has always been a bit of a personality and outspoken on her opinions," David says. "From the outside you think she is hard and tough but she is really soft as butter."

From early on David noticed his eldest daughter — who studied Arts/Law at Monash University — had a highly tuned sense of social justice and empathy. When she worked at his surgery in Mooroolbark on weekends, she spent extra time with the patients.

"They loved her. She just likes people very much and that comes across when she speaks to them," David says.

He recalls more than once watching her give the last of her weekly wage to beggars on Lygon St whenever the pair went to see a movie together.

"It wasn't much, I knew she didn't have much money," David says. "But I always deeply respected that."

Independence was another trait Shing displayed proudly while growing up. During university she travelled four times to Germany alone to explore and still feels strong ties to the country.

"I love the culture and the language. Interpersonally people are very upfront and I like people that are upfront," she says.

The travel gave Shing newfound confidence and at 23, after returning from an extended tour, she marched into the family living room and said she was in love with a woman.

"I am not going to pretend it was easy," Shing says about coming out. "I wish I had someone around like Penny Wong when I was growing up in terms of public figures that were there every day and making their way in the world. But I didn't."

As the first openly lesbian member of government in Victoria, Shing says some parts of her journey are too hard to discuss.

"It was challenging. People have to come out multiple times a day, in terms of the way in which people make assumptions about your partner being your friend or sister," she says.

Same-sex marriage is a passionate issue for Shing, who celebrated when the Federal Government's bid to hold a plebiscite on whether to legalise same-sex marriage was defeated in the Senate this month.

"It's being able to have the relationship with the person you love recognised in the same way as everybody else's relationship that is registered and celebrated under the Marriage Act," she says. "The idea of having to get the approval and for everyone





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in Australia to agree for that approval is actually a setback.

"It's like having to say, 'I am OK, there is nothing wrong with me'. Having a plebiscite on marriage equality is a hoop to jump through and I think that can be incredibly damaging."

In the bid to spur the issue of acceptance on a local level, Shing has become a fierce advocate for the controversial Safe Schools program, which the State Government has agreed to fund after the curriculum was axed by Canberra this year.

Despite publicly driving the issue, Shing prefers to keep her relationship with partner Lissie Ratcliff, Premier Daniel Andrews' chief of staff, under wraps.

"We had worked together in Government and Opposition," she says. "We were mates, we knew each other and it's one of those things. It just sort of happened."

The pair are regularly seen around Spring St together and Shing's colleague Shaun Leane supports their bid for privacy.

"There have been people that are partners in life and in politics before, but they have been a man and a woman. No one ever made a big deal about it and in this case it shouldn't be any different," Leane says.

Another of Shing's closely guarded subjects is her future political ambitions.

During her first foray into politics in 2009, she was an industrial relations adviser for current Victorian Attorney-General, Martin Pakula. She nabbed the role after years of experience in the field including a 12-month term as an associate at the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

Attentive and smart, she rose through the ranks, becoming an adviser to Andrews while in Opposition from 2010-12, before returning to the Australian Services Union.

In late 2013, she landed the prized preselection as Labor's Eastern Victoria candidate before winning the Upper House seat in November 2014.

Shing cites the emergence of the WorkChoices industrial relations legislation in 2006 as the key drive behind her political aspirations, saying rather than interpreting policy in courtrooms, she wanted to make the law "and make it better".

Since entering the Legislative Council, Shing has not slowed down.

"It was surreal and extraordinary and slightly terrifying and it has actually been an incredible amount of work," she says.

Shing's office is hidden beside an old staircase below the Legislative Council. Her desk is messy, covered in books and articles. She would rather spend her time reading or visiting the locals than cleaning.

She dresses mostly in black, and with edgy thick-rimmed glasses and a big personality, she is hard to ignore in the chamber. However she remains hesitant to be in the limelight outside Parliament.

"It's not about me," she says. "I got really lucky in the lottery of life. I got a good education, my body is healthy, I was born in a country and a state where we are prosperous and I have an obligation to pay that forward."

And so far Shing has kept her promise, taking on scores of political duties. She was recently announced as co-chair of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Gender Diverse and Intersex Taskforce and has sat on five parliamentary panels including the public accounts and estimates committee.

And her fondness for a verbal stoush in the committee has often left opponents licking their wounds, prompting them to label her an "attack dog".

Shing does not like the term but admits she won't back away from a fight.

"I am really curious, I love learning things. In a lot of ways I am one of those people who just never stopped asking why. Most people grow out of it, so I will question things and often from many angles to get an understanding of how the world works."

In July this year she was appointed to one of the busiest portfolios as Parliamentary Secretary for Emergency Services and she still manages to zigzag across her electorate every week.

However, when asked if she desires a ministerial role — like any ambitious politician — Shing deftly sidesteps the dangerous question.

"My dance card is pretty full right now," she says.

While Shing feels she has had a pretty lucky life, last December she was rocked by a family tragedy. Her eldest brother, Patrick, had been diagnosed with an aggressive prostate cancer three years earlier, and was close to death. Shing took leave and sat by his side until the day he died.

"He is always someone I looked up to, someone



whose life I followed with enormous interest," she says with tears streaming down her cheeks. "He was diagnosed with prostate cancer at 39, so in many cases he wrote some record books and became a bit of a medical novelty."

"He went from somebody who could run marathons, to somebody whose body gave out on him. It was such a privilege and an honour to care for him."

"He chose to die at home, so we set everything up. We took turns caring for him. It was one of the most difficult but lovely things that has ever happened."

His death played a major role in forming Shing's view on the issue of voluntary euthanasia.

"I have always been of the view that dignity and self-determination are priorities and need to be absolutely respected," she says. "Having cared for my brother and seeing the way that terminal illness took away self-determination and free-will from him, it reinforced to me the views I already held."

Shing joins a growing number of MPs, including

Trailblazer: Harriet Shing (above, with rescue pup Ellie) is passionate about a range of issues in her role as a Victorian MP (far left).

PICTURES ANDREW TAUBER

Health Minister Jill Hennessy and Treasurer Tim Pallas, who have publicly declared support for assisted dying after the Andrews Government flagged it may look at the controversial practice.

But Shing says that debate is very much down the track. Moving forward, her biggest challenge will be stepping up for the community who put her into Parliament.

The closure of the Hazelwood power station in March with 750 jobs to go will deal a devastating blow to the Latrobe Valley, the heart of Shing's electorate.

"The community has been disappointed time and time again and the challenge is about longer-term solutions and not just a sugar hit and the hardest part for our government is tackling the intergenerational issues," she says. "It's going to be about listening and being responsive."

Something Shing knows how to do.

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